

**Rekha Wazir** (ed.), *The Gender Gap in Basic Education: NGOs as Change Agents*. New Delhi: Sage Publications. 2000. 274 pages. Rs. 395 (hb), Rs. 225 (pb).

Written for and at the behest of international donor agencies interested in this subject, this collection of specially commissioned essays with an introduction and conclusion by the editor poses the question: what is the role of NGOs as change agents in reducing the gender gap in basic education in India? Put like this, the answer seems simple enough—very little, since NGOs have hardly entered this sector. This narrow perspective, deliberately chosen, is both the strength and the weakness of this book. It works very well as a kind of project evaluation report and set of handy guidelines; but at another level, as an attempt to assess the issues raised by the gender gap in education, it does not go far enough.

To begin with, there is an awkwardness in the terminology: the term 'basic education' has a very definite connotation in India, referring to a well-known, if now neglected, Gandhian concept, that is, elementary education built around productive work by staff and students, and basing the pedagogy on work experience. For the purposes of this book, however, it has been defined as 'elementary education for girls and literacy, general knowledge and life skills for women'. Clumsy, but fair enough if addressed mainly to funding agencies and international readers. And this sort of ambiguity runs right through the book.

Next, the very act of focusing on the role of NGOs gives them an importance unwarranted by the size of their actual presence on the education scene. More seriously, this results in de-emphasising or ignoring the powerful impact of the 'dual track' in Indian education. The widespread, silent and pernicious influence of the parallel system that has developed in the private sector to serve the needs of the more privileged does not seem to be fully appreciated. Again and again, some of the authors, and especially the editor, cry out against the marginalisation of women and certain other groups in education, and searching for the reasons, come up with expressions like 'social-apathy' 'lack of political will' or 'bureaucratic indifference'. The connection, however, is not made with the nature of the polity or with the insight that the marginalised are voiceless, while the rich, powerful and articulate have no need to speak out since they have been able to get an alternative system to meet their own needs.

It is also worth noting that most of the significant educational movements in India outside the public sector, both in pre-independence times and after, have taken a holistic approach and argued for access to education for all children—the concern with gender is more recent and perhaps here reflects the concerns of the funders. In the Indian context a more pointed question, raised 30 years ago by the late J.P. Naik, might have been: why have so many groups, not merely women, been left out of the

process of educational development? And this ambivalence about the objectives of the book is expressed in the inclusion of chapters dealing with other marginalised groups—child labour and SC/STs. Neither chapter concerns itself with gender issues.

The essays that make up the book not only reflect this ambivalence, but are uneven in quality. Ratna Sudarshan and Malavika Karlekar set the scene ably with the first two chapters on the educational status of women and girls' access to schooling respectively. These are well-researched, thorough and methodical overviews, replete with references and statistics, though somewhat distanced by their academic approach. Both make brief reference to the private sector, but fail to account for its impact on the overall situation. Vimala Ramachandran, whose direct engagement with the subject is evident in her writing, gives a brilliant and sensitive analysis of the relationships between literacy, development and empowerment. Drawing on her own experience in the field, she comments on the uneasy relationship between the women's movement and literacy/education, examines the dangers of an instrumentalist view of education, and accounts for the 'saga of missed opportunities' in the total literacy campaigns, analysing the reasons for their failure to build on initial successes. She concludes with a review of the Mahila Samakhya project.

The next two essays move in a different direction. Shanta Sinha, dealing with the controversial relationship between child labour and education, deliberately sets up ninepins only to bring them crashing down. In a critique of alternative viewpoints on this issue, she quickly dismisses the arguments of all but her own viewpoint, ignoring the mounting volume of evidence from studies that point to the importance of the supply side in explaining the failure to attain universal quality education for all. Her uncritical acceptance of the present formal school system as it is (which most commentators agree badly needs changes to meet the needs of *all* children, not only girls or working children) is a solution hard to accept. In the section on alternatives, for example, only one example is quoted, and that is of an institution with which the author is associated. Geetha Nambissan in her essay provides the backdrop for understanding the exclusion of tribal communities from educational development, comments on the paucity of NGO initiatives in this field and discusses the cultural, pedagogical and political/social issues underlying the concepts of identity and exclusion.

Atreyee Cordeiro's essay explores the very new area of building partnerships and coalitions, and provides some useful information on the kind of partnerships already in operation, especially those involving the corporate sector, about which little is known in the world of education. Couched in somewhat hard-to-read jargon, the essay would be of greatest interest to funders who want to know where to put their money in the next decade. Funding coalitions, networks and social movements that

seek to promote equity in education seems to be an idea whose time has come, but which needs to be endorsed with some reservations. The concluding chapter is even more directly addressed to donors in the form of advice, and is an eye-opener to those unfamiliar with the inner workings of funding agencies.

Returning to the question of the two stools between which the book falls, the more modest aim is amply achieved, while the gaps in the other may well provide stimulus for a more stringent future analysis of the shortcomings in our education, leading to more radical solutions.

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**Meenakshi Thapan** (ed.), *Anthropological Journeys*. Hyderabad: Orient Longman. 1998. 320 pages. Rs. 275.

The significance of this book lies in the intensifying concern with the process of research in the discipline of social anthropology. In their early stages, the social sciences were striving to be at par with the natural sciences in their emphasis on objectivity. However, later works began to acknowledge the difficulty in attaining objectivity in the social sciences, the primary reasons for this being the unique nature of the subject matter and the role of the anthropologist's 'self' in the process of fieldwork. The present volume attempts to carry the concern further and explores complexities that have so far been overlooked. The central concern of the book therefore is the process of research, more specifically, fieldwork, and within these the 'subjective' elements. According to Thapan, there is no single and universal truth to be scientifically understood in the social sciences. This volume is premised on the significance of experience and vision, and the many voices and silences of both the subject and the anthropologist.

While the post-modernist approaches do emphasise the subjective elements in research by understanding all phenomena in terms of cultural relativism and as contextualised in space and time, they have a serious shortcoming. As feminists point out, politics and power are as much present in the research process as in social life. Post-modernist approaches emphasise plurality and the relativity of social life, completely overlooking power inequities between subjects and between the researcher and the subject. The book attempts to recognise the politics of these as well as the subjective elements within some aspects of the research process by examining these issues in the context of the anthropologist's construction of the 'self' /subject as well as the 'Other' /'non-self' /object, subjectivity and objectivity and gendering of the self in the field. At the least, it is important for researchers to be conscious of their location and social identity, and